

The Welcome Project: Issues facing mission to Europe from a colonial perspective

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Introduction

Considering the title of this article you might expect to read about a Welcome Project, mission to Europe and colonial perspectives related to this mission effort focused towards Europe. And rightly so! Firstly a very condensed summary will follow about European colonial history, emphasizing the link between mission and the colonial efforts. Secondly the perspectives of the 'South and West' will be discussed. Then, acknowledging the missional movement from the South to Europe, the Welcome Project will be explained and finally a discussion about the findings and related implications concludes this article.

European colonialism and mission

As much has been said and written about this topic a few remarks will suffice: we all are aware of examples like the Spanish and Portuguese dividing their territory in Latin America, the British doing the same in Africa and the Dutch way of doing business in the Far East, just to mention a few. All of them brought clergy as well, reasoning that the pagans needed civilization. One might wonder which role 'the love of Christ compelling us' played in all these efforts.

A very good summary of this epoch can be found in 'Missionare aus der Zweidrittel-Welt für Europa' where is written:

"First the Latin speaking and catholic nations travelled to new, undisclosed, countries. Then the Anglo-Saxon countries followed. They all got involved in an imperialistic adventure. In this way 300 years of Spanish and Portuguese colonialism was followed by 150 years of protestant invasion. Attracted by geographic discoveries and new trade opportunities which opened to the South and the East, the colonialists were convinced that they were bringing civilisation to the 'backward pagan people'. They became the masters of the seas, took ownership of far countries, exported their manners and customs to these countries and forced the people to speak their language. And, of course, under the mask of aid they misused the very cheap local wages to obtain large profits for themselves."

Thucydides (an Athenian aristocrat at the time of Peloponnesian War) describes the relationship between states as "a world in which the strong do what ever they like and the weak suffer what they should suffer. Power and domination are the basis of that system." The relationship described here between states prevailed during the so called colonial times, but it can still be seen now in things like the recent WTO summits. The only difference is that now the clergy is no longer present.

Berlin (1884) had the 'honour' to be the meeting place of the leaders of the great (read powerful) countries of the world. These leaders met in order to divide the power of these countries over 'their' colonised regions. No representatives of the colonised countries were present to make their voice heard. New borders were drawn as still can be seen at a map of Africa for instance, where many borders are sharp straight lines from A to B. Sometimes though an exception to this rule can be seen, a sudden curve, as in the border between

Kenya and Tanzania. A deviation due to the family ties between the British and the German people in power. As a birthday present the queen of England decided to give Mount Kilimanjaro to her German relative, thus the exception.

It is obvious that people in the Southern hemisphere even today are affected by this European attitude. Also Christians from these regions carry this historical knowledge and thus it is part of the luggage they bring with them when coming to Europe as missionaries. Unfortunately also the receiving party proves not to be free from their colonial background. Both aspects will be looked at in the following paragraph.

The perspectives from the South and the West

Since the 1960's many critical reactions could be heard from Africa and Latin America about their observations of how mission was performed among them. Their experiences caused comments like:

- "First the white man came with the Bible, then he came with rifles, then with chains; finally he build a prison and forced us to paying taxes."
- "When the Europeans came they had the Bible and we had the land. Now we have the Bible, they have the land."
- The Ethiopian emperor Theodorus II already said at the end of the 19th century: "I know how the British work: First arrive traders and missionaries, then ambassadors. A little later they arrive with guns."
- Orlando Costas talking about mission to South America: "The mission movement is tied indissolubly with the colonial and neo-colonial system. Because of this, Christ Himself is seen as a white liberator, the great European 'conquistador', the justifier of the rich and the 'deafener' of the consciousness of the oppressor"

The experiences reflect the reality of an unbreakable relationship between colonial activities and missionary efforts. As Ruth Tucker in her book 'From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya' states it: "The strong critics of African leaders on the European mission efforts are caused by the relationship between mission and colonialism and by the export of European civilization." Of course we also need to realise that not all what was done in the cooperation between colonial powers and missionaries had a negative effect.

J.D.Y Peel in his book 'Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba' explains both the advantages and disadvantages of this collaboration. His research reveals that even among the missionaries themselves different opinions were held when speaking about the (in)dependency of the mission, in the end though it becomes clear that the disadvantages prevail over the advantages.

But it is not only the missional efforts that were directly related to the colonial activities that have affected the Christian community of the Southern hemisphere. It appears that the colonial attitude of the past remains rooted in the hearts and minds of much European mission leadership.

Half way through the 19th century the intention of the European mission groups working in the Southern hemisphere was still to respect the presence of Christians in that part of the world and to just be initiators for further growth of Christianity in that part of the world. However the decisions made by the political leaders in Berlin, whether consciously or subconsciously, changed this intention. This became obvious during the Edinburgh conference 25 years later.

Edinburgh (1910) showed a rather simple view of 'the missional flow': The Christian West should Christianize the rest of the world, a view fully compatible with the colonial experience. The same attitude is reflected by the very small number of delegates from the rest of the world attending this conference. In its discussions Edinburgh also made the double mistake of assuming Europe to be one hundred percent Christian whilst neglecting any acknowledgement of the presence of active Christianity in the South.

It took until Lausanne (1974) before the eyes of the worldwide mission community were opened to reality. And even then it took a decennium or more before this reality was to affect missional practice to any great degree and real efforts to respect each other and establish appropriate cooperation between the so called South and the West would become reality.

Until the present day the cooperation described above is still largely confined to those mission leaders involved in mission work worldwide. Several agencies who are only focused on a specific region in the world, still seem to follow the old, colonial paradigm. Church leaders in Europe appear even more caught in this paradigm.

In order to bring a change in this situation the Welcome Project was initiated.

Welcome Project

The Welcome Project is meant to be a Code of Good Practice for European church and mission leaders on the one hand and non-European missionaries to Europe on the other. It tries to build a bridge between the old and the new paradigm, between the tradition of the Old Sending Countries and the missional eagerness of the New Sending Countries.

This Code was accepted by the members of the European Evangelical Missionary Alliance (EEMA) during their last annual meeting in October 2004 and is endorsed by the Mission Commission of the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA-MC).

Although this Code covers much more than the effects of the historical past, it does pay attention to these matters. Often the European church leader or the non-European missionary does not recognise his attitude as being a result of history. For example when the eagerness of answering Gods calling surpassed the need for preparation and training for the missionary, the Western churches were quick to call them 'bible and toothbrush' missionaries. that condescending attitude is still present even though nowadays the missionary from the Southern hemisphere is often very much aware of the need for training and the contextualisation of the Gospel focussed on a post Christendom Europe.

Also the attitude of the European churches against a new, other, livelier, culture of worship was greatly underestimated by the Southern missionaries. The mind-set of the European, again, is one of "knowing for much longer how worship should be done", but remarkably enough the missionary feels either insecure: "Isn't he after all the servant?" or – an escapist of the old rule- he tends to overrule by "doing it his way", refusing to listen to counsel even when this counsel was given with good intentions.

Clearly this leads to mutual frustrations. The Welcome Project tries to involve both parties in a program helping them to get acquainted with each other and to understand the background of felt sensitivities.

Conclusion

K. Rajendran, director of the India Missionary Association and chairman of WEA-MC wrote recently: "we must be sensitive for different areas of the world, as the new Christian world is trying to figure out what is Christianity for them in the region without breaking the basic doctrines. So there has to be caution. The churches and the traditions of the traditional Christianity will become different, especially in the future as there is a tremendous reaction to the colonization and westernization of the last hundred or two hundred years."

Caution is needed. Caution on the one hand to understand the reaction of the non-European missionary against presumptuous Western domination, whilst still showing an enormous eagerness to preach the Gospel to a secularised Europe and on the other hand the stance of the European Christian: although in the political and economical realm the Western supremacy still continues (at least in the hearts and minds of the Westerners) European Christians still need to come to terms with the fact that European Christianity is a minority movement. Within Europe itself, but also when looking to the Christian and mission developments in the South. That's why the European church is faced with a contradiction between 'feeling, or sensing' and 'reality'. Even now Europeans wonder what help the South can give, if at all. Should Europe not be their helper? Unfortunately the relational gap between coloniser and colonised still exists.

Our non-European brethren do come to Europe though in spite of their own sensitivities towards Europe and the European hesitance to welcome them. That's a fact. According to Comibam, the Latin American Mission Movement, more than 1000 Latinos work as missionaries in Europe. Africans and Asians show similar figures, though not always directly send as a missionary to Europe, but frequently as a Christian immigrant who takes up his or hers responsibility as a witness for Christ.

The vision of Jean Monnet (1888-1979), the 'founding father' of the European Union, was to unite. In the 1950's he wrote: "The six European countries (the founding countries of the EU, KvdW) did not start the huge undertaking of tearing down separating walls in order to erect even higher walls against 'the outside world'. We do not connect states, we unite people."

That vision appears to be at the mercy of politicians and thus resulting not in a new wall but in a 'silver curtain' around the 25 countries that form the European Union. Protectionism seems to be the key word. European Christianity needs to be careful to avoid repeating this protectionism and truly seek to move beyond the traditional colonial attitudes.

As Christians we are called to unite people, to tear down walls and curtains and so we have to realise and accept that the West has to deal with its pride of historical (and false) leadership. Likewise the brethren from the South should balance their urgency to preach Jesus with the same eagerness to unite. Only when both West and South respond like this will Christians be the testimony the world is looking for.

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